

The Correspondence of Charles Darwin

December 29 / 01

Dr. Joshua Lederberg
Rockefeller University
1230 York Avenue
New York; NY 10021-6399

Dear Dr. Lederberg,

You may perhaps remember a brief correspondence we had relating to your interest in whether Darwin and Pasteur ever knew one another or corresponded. (The answer was that there was no evidence of any relationship.)

At any rate, I had looked forward to hearing your paper and to meeting you at the APS meeting in November. I had also hoped to talk to you about a Darwin problem I have been working at for a long time. I realize that the problems that you now have undertaken as a result of the September 11 events may preclude your giving any time to my question, but on the chance that it may provide some diversion, I will share it with you. I will of course fully understand if, under the circumstances, I do not receive any answer to this letter.

The problem is what might be the explanation of Darwin's illness. There are at least a dozen theories, ranging from the psychological effects of stress, hyperventilation, inability to grieve at the death of his mother, to physical effects of mercury poisoning and Chagas disease. None of these has any evidence except Darwin's own descriptions of his symptoms, and diagnoses by various physicians he consulted. The theory that I personally find more convincing than any of the others is that Darwin suffered from a breakdown of his immune system. This view has been advanced by a woman in Edinburgh named Fabienne Smith, who suffers from some of the same symptoms, and, though she has no medical training, has become recognized as an allergist who has helped many others with similar ailments. I have been corresponding with her for over fifteen years and have given her some assistance in two articles she has published in the *Journal of the History of Biology*.

Her theory has been given scant attention by most of the recent biographers of Darwin, who tend to follow Dr. Ralph Colp, whose book "To be an Invalid" is the most extensive discussion of the problem and who has recently added Chagas Disease to his largely psychiatric explanations of Darwin's problem.

I and the other editors on our Darwin Correspondence team are currently working on the letters of the years 1865—6, during which Darwin suffered the most extensive bout of his illness and the most serious effect on his work. For one of the volumes I would like to write an appendix to summarize the problem and the various theories. The one I would need most help in researching is Mrs. Smith's. But before I go any further I would like to know your opinion on whether there is any chance that the immune dysfunction theory has anything going for it. If there is, I will seek out some immunologist with an interest in the history of science who might be willing to

read a 30-page manuscript by Mrs. Smith in defense of her theory and give me his opinion of it.

I know how busy you must be, so please do not trouble to reply to this letter. I will not interpret it as either a negative opinion or lack of interest.

Yours sincerely,



Frederick Burkhardt

General Editor

The Correspondence of Charles Darwin

P.O.Box 1067

Bennington, Vt 05201

e-mail fhb@sover.net

tel.&fax: (802) 442 9573

P.S. I enclose some notes Darwin made to be sent to John Chapman, a physician who had sent him a pamphlet describing a treatment for seasickness and several different diseases, that consisted of applying an ice pack to the spine. Darwin undertook the treatment, but like all the others he had tried, it produced no improvement. I add a transcription we are using in our next volume, 13 (1865). 713